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ABSTRACT

In 1988, Research for Better Schools (RBS) proposed the development of state-specific rural assistance councils (RAC) in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania to assist in strengthening rural school-community partnerships and in planning rural school improvement. This report summarizes the activities of each of the four RACs during 1988-92 in the following areas: (1) formation and organization; (2) developing a state-specific working definition of "rural"; (3) developing a statewide improvement plan for rural education; and (4) disseminating information related to the statewide improvement plan. In addition, some RACs sought additional resources to implement rural and small school improvement plans, and supported local school improvement activities. Despite differences among the four councils in membership and activities, several commonalities were observed: (1) the support of state education agencies (SEA) was important in establishing a firm foundation for the RACs; (2) SEAs were critical in identifying and recommending RAC members who were committed individuals representing important rural constituencies; (3) the development of a rural education assistance plan was a slow process that appeared to move in cycles; (4) the involvement of the RBS staff member participating on each RAC and providing technical and some financial assistance, was a key element in RAC organization and development; and (5) all RACs achieved an initial objective of identifying and disseminating successful practices and programs for rural schools. (SV)

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IMPLEMENTING RURAL EDUCATION ASSISTANCE PLANS

AN INTERIM REPORT

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IMPLEMENTING RURAL EDUCATION ASSISTANCE PLANS
AN INTERIM REPORT

In September 1988, Research for Better Schools (RBS) responded to a Department of Education proposal to conduct activities that addressed priority issues as part of a Rural Education Initiative. RBS' previous Rural Initiative focused on improving the achievement levels, subject matter knowledge, and thinking and reasoning skills of students from rural and small schools. It was proposed that the FY 88 Rural Education Initiative focus on two additional priorities, strengthening partnerships between rural schools and the community, and assisting rural schools to organize for school improvement. RBS translated these priorities into a specific strategy for working with rural and small schools: the development of state-specific rural school assistance plans in collaboration with state education agencies (SEAs) and other relevant organizations.

The establishment of Rural Assistance Councils (RACs) in each of the four states in the mid-Atlantic region (Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania) was proposed by RBS to assist states with the development of statewide rural assistance plans. RACs were to be formed with the support and cooperation of the chief state school officer and were to consist of local education agency (LEA) and SEA representatives and other key individuals with expertise and interest in rural education in the state. An RBS staff member was to participate as a member of each RAC and provide technical assistance regarding operational activities.

The RACs, which were initially formed for planning purposes, have evolved over the four-year period since their establishment to assume a major role in their state's rural school improvement efforts. They increasingly have become vehicles to develop enhanced capacity for rural school redesign

and reform in the mid-Atlantic region. The remainder of this paper summarizes the activities of each of the four RACs over the past four years and suggests some preliminary findings based on RBS' experience with these innovative organizational structures. The activities of the four RACs are described as follows:

- forming and organizing the RAC;
- developing a state-specific working definition of "rural;"
- developing a statewide improvement plan for rural education; and
- disseminating information related to the statewide improvement plan.

In addition, some RACs engaged in one or both of the following activities also related to the statewide improvement plan:

- seeking additional resources to implement rural/small school reform plans; and
- supporting local rural/small school improvement activities.

A more comprehensive report on the RACs, including impact data, will be developed by RBS at the end of its five-year contract with the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI).

The Delaware Rural Assistance Council

The Delaware RAC was formed in the fourth quarter of FY 88. RBS received SEA cooperation and support in forming a RAC and in identifying seven potential RAC members who were valuable contributors to Delaware's rural activities. The seven members, who each agreed to participate initially, were: an SEA director, an LEA superintendent, an LEA administrative assistant, two representatives from vocational/technical LEAs, and one representative from each of two state agencies, the Delaware Grange and the Delaware Farm Bureau. The participation of an RBS staff member raised the RAC membership to eight. Throughout the four-year period, the RAC decided to

broaden its representation and increased both its size and the variety of associations represented. The RAC now has ten members; four initial members remain, including the LEA superintendent who serves as the RAC chair. Three additional associations are now represented: the Delaware State Education Association, the Delaware School Boards Association, and the Delaware Electric Cooperative.

The Delaware SEA considered its interests and needs with regard to rural education to be highly compatible with the RAC's mission of developing statewide rural education assistance plans. That is, the SEA viewed the entire state, with the exception of the Wilmington area, as rural and all educational initiatives as emphasizing rural school improvement. The RAC, however, recognized a need to adopt its own working definition of rural and to then identify Delaware's specific rural needs. In June 1989, after extensive discussion, the Delaware RAC arrived at the following definition of rural:

> ...those districts with fewer than 3,400 students or less than $130,000 full valuation of real estate per pupil in the 1988-89 school year. Included are districts with no or limited beach development, that are sparsely populated, and lack extensive business and industrial facilities.

RAC members considered both size and relative wealth to be important features of the definition. For example, they strongly believed that the rural districts selected for attention in the state should be poor as well as rural. This led to the exclusion of two seemingly "rural" districts, which were wealthy resort areas, with annual cycles of population flux and with per capita income well above any "rural" average. RAC members also felt that it was important to include one densely populated but poor district not typically considered rural. Thus, according to the above definition and guidelines, nine of Delaware's sixteen school districts were considered rural. Eight of these districts are located in two of Delaware's three counties.

As a first step in developing a statewide improvement plan for rural education, the RAC developed a survey for superintendents of the state's rural districts to identify and rank the most pressing issues facing Delaware's rural schools. The highest priority issues were the low tax base of rural areas, the movement for parental choice, and the reluctance of teachers to settle and teach in rural areas. These findings, which formed an initial focus for the Delaware RAC's rural assistance plan, were then presented to rural educators across the state and were discussed with representative constituencies and other key individuals involved in state rural activities.

In FY 91, RAC members decided that the long-range goals of the State Board of Education should serve as a framework for its rural education assistance plan and activities. Specifically, the RAC identified two areas of interest: continuing to build consensus and support for quality education, and promoting partnerships between families, communities, and schools. An additional area of RAC interest was increasing use of instructional technology. The RAC then planned and co-sponsored a number of activities which addressed these three areas. One major activity was co-sponsoring, with the Delaware Department of Public Instruction and the Delaware Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, a conference on "Technology's Role in Educational Change." A follow-up mini-conference was then held for interested rural educators on the uses of interactive TV and distance learning.

In FY 92, the RAC planned and conducted two statewide public forums on the State Board of Education goals of "building consensus and support for quality education," and "promoting partnerships with families, communities, and schools." As part of each forum, rural school and community representatives interested in these goals and related issues presented testimony, which was then discussed by participants to ascertain the rural

community's concerns and contributions. RBS documented the forum presentations, action plans, and recommendations; in FY 93, the RAC will submit a report of the recommendations to the State Board of Education. Also, a press conference on the two public forums was held.

To date, the RAC has not been active in the two additional areas of RAC-related activities listed in the introduction to the report: seeking additional resources to implement rural school reform plans, and supporting local rural school improvement activities. However, during the past two years the RAC has explored working with one or two rural school districts in their restructuring efforts. These exploratory activities will be continued during FY 93.

During the RAC's last meeting in FY 92, the members decided that the RAC agenda must include revisiting a number of issues, including the state definition of rural (in light of changing demographics) and priority topics for the RAC's long-range plan. The RAC also is considering developing a second needs assessment survey for rural educators.

The Maryland Rural Assistance Council

At the time the RACs were formed, Maryland was the only state in the mid-Atlantic region to have a major rural initiative already underway. This initiative, the Rural School Enhancement Project (RSEP), was designed by the governor's office to assist the seven poorest rural county school systems. The objective of the project was for the approximately 135 participating rural schools to develop school assistance plans which addressed the implementation of five rigorous standards for the improvement of student outcomes. The Maryland SEA requested that the new rural initiative proposed by RBS support

this existing state project through cooperative, rather than independent, rural activities.

In early FY 89, the following eleven individuals agreed to serve as council members: the seven superintendents from the RSEP districts, the Director of the RSEP, the Director of Maryland's Eastern Shore Educational Consortium, the Executive Director of the Governor's Commission on School Performance, and an RBS staff person. These RAC members served as the Advisory Committee of the RSEP. Throughout its four years, the RAC has maintained its representation of the seven rural county school districts, the Eastern Shore Consortium, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), and RBS.

The Maryland RAC developed a definition of rural which encompassed both population density and poverty criteria, with poverty defined as per capita income. The definition, when applied to Maryland's districts, singled out the seven less wealthy rural districts which were the focus of the governor's RSEP. That initiative had been launched after the governor visited two rural districts in the state and became aware of the inadequacies of local, state, and federal funding for meeting district needs. The seven RSEP districts included four counties on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay, one district on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay, and the state's two mountainous and westernmost districts.

The RAC's initial priority was to focus on supporting RSEP school systems in the development of rural school assistance plans, due November, 1989. As a first step, a massive needs assessment was conducted in each of the seven districts. The data were then converted by RBS into a statewide rural survey of priorities for rural education in Maryland, and the survey was piloted. This effort then became the prototype for a major state

accountability program, the Maryland School Performance Program (MSPP), which began the following year. The RAC then focused on assisting rural districts in the identification and location of resources and strategies to address identified educational needs. A two-day conference was planned and conducted by the RAC in the spring of 1989 in Hunt Valley, Maryland. The conference was designed to provide school personnel with specific information on a range of strategies, processes, and programs related to the RSEP standards: dropout prevention, student attendance, student achievement, and post-graduate career choices. A conference outcome was for rural educators to develop a school improvement plan. More than 670 educators representing Maryland's rural schools and other rural educators from the mid-Atlantic region attended. Almost 50 promising practices were highlighted. In addition, there was a pre-conference session for members of the four state RACs to meet as a group.

The Maryland RAC continued to support the governor's RSEP. Following the Maryland conference, the state superintendent attended several RAC meetings and expressed enthusiasm for the accomplishments of the RAC/RSEP as evidenced by financial increases in the state budget. The identification of promising practices for implementation in rural schools also continued to be a RAC priority. RAC members themselves visited several rural school improvement projects validated by the National Diffusion Network (NDN), including Johnson City, New York's "Outcome-Driven Developmental Model" (ODDM), and participated in inservice sessions, e.g., infusing thinking skills across the curriculum. The RAC, with RBS' support, developed a system to guide county school system staff in reviewing plans. The RAC also developed a peer visitation model to enable teachers to visit within or between systems.

In 1990, the seven rural county superintendents decided to revise the rural school improvement plan, previously based on the RSEP report, and

authorized a committee to draft a mission statement and objectives based on RAC discussions. The RAC's newly adopted mission was to identify and address issues specifically related to rural schools' achievement of the performance standards recently established by the MSPP. The RAC plan had the following specific objectives:

- maintaining an information base for tracking improvements in school performance within rural school systems and describing effective programs and practices which can lead to improved performances;
- promoting the application of current promising practices and emerging electronic technologies in the delivery of educational services;
- designing and administering effective curriculum, instruction, assessment, and staff development programs and practices; and
- facilitating the design and implementation of restructuring projects intended to achieve the desired standards.

The council's main strategy for addressing rural school improvement was to focus on infusing thinking skills into the curriculum of the seven participating school systems. This was the projected centerpiece of the RAC plan and consistent with MSPP. This focus on thinking skills, including staff development and enhancing resources, continues. To date, staff from Maryland's rural school districts have participated in various training sessions, including two by RBS staff. A proposal for obtaining supplemental funding was drafted by the RAC and MSDE, but not circulated. Several of the RAC districts have managed to fund thinking skills training and curriculum development with support from MSDE, while others will have use of RBS' Lab Network funds for the same purpose.

Starting in late 1991, the RAC turned its attention to identifying and addressing needs facing rural schools based on the annual MSPP school performance report. Areas of focus for the RAC in 1993 are currently under

discussion. Decisions will be based on RAC members' perceptions of critical issues to be identified in an RBS survey.

The New Jersey Rural Assistance Council

The New Jersey SEA was very receptive to developing a Rural Assistance Council (RAC) to address issues and problems of rural education in the state. The SEA had no major rural initiatives underway, although several rural agencies and individual educators were pressing for more statewide attention to rural and small schools. RBS and the SEA initially selected seven individuals from within the state to serve as RAC members. These seven members, who agreed to participate on the state council, represented rural and small school districts and associations with rural interests and concerns. They included a chief school administrator, 4 district superintendents, a county superintendent, and an assemblyperson. The associations represented by these individuals included: the SEA, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators (NJASA) Small Schools Committee, and the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA). In addition, an RBS staff member served on the council, thus raising the RAC membership to eight. Throughout the four-year period, two of the initial RAC members remained, including the chief school administrator and the RBS staff member. Representation of the four initial associations continued. However, the size of the council was reduced to its present six members. Two decisions guided the change in membership; the first was to have three county superintendents on the council representing the north, central, and southern regions of the state; the second was to broaden the scope of the RAC by adding a member from the New Jersey State Board of Education and from Rutgers University's Graduate School of Education.

At the time the RAC was established, New Jersey had not formulated specific policies regarding its rural schools; moreover, there was no state approved definition of rural schools. Although the NJASA Small Schools Committee had developed its own working definition of small as well as rural districts, which was any district with 1200 students or less, this definition encompassed almost half of the state's 600+ school districts. The RAC felt that for rural needs to be clearly differentiated, a new, narrower definition of rural was needed. The following definition was developed and endorsed by the RAC:

> A rural/small school district is any district outside the continuously built-up urbanized or suburbanized area of a major city or borough and generally demonstrating the following six characteristics:
>
> - limited industry
> - usually including agriculture as an industry
> - limited employment choices in the area
> - low population and/or low housing density
> - limited public transportation
> - limited public/community resources.

This definition, and a tentative listing of 141 New Jersey rural school districts which met the criteria, were reviewed and approved by each of the state's county superintendents. These districts were located in 12 of the state's 21 counties and represented mostly the mountainous northwest and the coastal southwest regions.

The New Jersey RAC adopted the following broad mission statement: "... to directly improve the quality of education for all students in New Jersey's rural schools." In addition, the RAC established the following procedural objectives:

- to review the RAC mission and membership;
- to develop a timeline for RAC-sponsored activities;
- to identify resources, including partnerships and consortia;
- to plan conferences and workshops on promising practices in areas such as early childhood education, instructional technology, math and science, geography, cooperative learning, outcome-based education, higher-order thinking skills, and multicultural education;
- to study and track restructuring and rural school reorganization;
- to plan and conduct rural school conferences; and
- to disseminate R&D-based information to rural schools.

The council's first objective for rural school improvement was to increase the awareness and use of exemplary school programs and classroom practices by identifying and publicizing successful practices. The RAC recognized that a major issue for rural education in the state related to the fact that rural schools were not organized to act as resources for one another. Rural/small schools and classrooms did not share outstanding programs and practices. The RAC developed a rural model for identifying and disseminating promising practices, developed data collection instruments, and conducted on-site visits to 30 rural schools to observe and verify promising practices. As a result of this activity, a sourcebook, Spotlight on Rural Schools in New Jersey: A Directory of Effective Programs, Practices, and Resources for Rural Educators, was developed and disseminated by the RAC to New Jersey's rural/small school districts.

This objective continues to be a focus for RAC activities. The exchange of research-based information about promising practices and programs was a major goal of each of the two New Jersey Rural Small Schools Conferences, co-sponsored by the RAC and a number of partner organizations in 1990 and 1992. Also, the RAC recently developed a process for selecting

programs and practices, entitled "Small Schools Spotlight the Best," and is using the six National Education Goals agreed upon by the President and Governors of the United States in 1990, as a focus for identifying and recognizing successful programs.

In addition to the identification and dissemination of promising practices, two other priority issues became RAC objectives for addressing state rural education needs. First, the RAC decided to support state policymakers' exploration of regionalizing and consolidating rural and small districts. Many states were adopting a regionalization/consolidation strategy for reducing the number of school districts, primarily to generate additional revenue. The RAC saw a need to develop and disseminate R&D-based information to both the legislature and practitioners. A paper which synthesized relevant research was developed for this purpose and to encourage informed dialogue.

A second priority issue for the RAC became the adoption of a community-based model for rural revitalization. The goal of the model is to forge alliances among educators and the community in order to create a new ethos of public education for all community members, regardless of age. RAC members received training on the model, explored with several districts their interest in implementing the model, and are currently working indepth with two pilot districts to develop school/community action plans as part of their planning for implementation of the school/community center concept. The pilot districts are North Haledon in the northern part of the state, and Salem County in the south.

Recently, the New Jersey RAC has also been active in working with districts to obtain additional resources to implement rural/small school reform plans. One effort in which the RAC participated was the drafting of a New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) proposal for a rural

county to develop a partnership to create community-based learning communities, based on the model noted above. Although the NASDC proposal was not funded, the county is moving forward with enormous community support. In addition, a RAC-developed proposal to the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation to support teacher and administrator training in developing the community-based model for rural revitalization was funded.

The Pennsylvania Rural Assistance Council

At the time the RACs were formed, Pennsylvania had few formal policies which specifically addressed rural education and the SEA was not considering any major rural initiatives. However, various institutions and organizations within the state had implemented "policy-like" initiatives in order to address the issues and problems of rural education. These groups included, the Pennsylvania Rural Coalition, with a membership of statewide associations and organizations; the Small School Districts Task Force created by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE); an offshoot of the Task Force, the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS); a Rural Services Institute at Mansfield University; and an Office of Rural Affairs created by the Governor. As expected, RBS received SEA cooperation in forming a RAC, and seven individuals were identified and agreed to serve as members: three superintendents of rural school districts; the Coordinator of Mansfield University's Rural Services Institute; the Executive Director of an Intermediate Unit; an SEA Chief, Division of Auxillary Services; and an RBS staff member. Throughout its four years, the RAC has maintained representation of three rural school districts, an Intermediate Unit, the SEA, and RBS. The RAC has also increased its size to ten and broadened its representation to include two staff members from Pennsylvania State

University, the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Academy for the Profession of Teaching, and a rural education consultant (who served as the Director of PARSS).

Because of Pennsylvania's extensive rural population, the RAC initially identified rural districts as only those districts in the most rural counties in the state. This working definition of rural included counties with fewer than 75 residents per square mile and less than 100,000 people in the entire county. These criteria defined 80 rural districts from 23 of the state's 67 counties, the largest number forming a band across the northern tier of the state. Included was another cluster of five counties in the south central part of the state approximately equidistant from Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Finally, Greene County, in the extreme southwest corner of the state, adjacent to West Virginia, was included with five rural districts. In the summer of 1992, the RAC changed its definition of rural schools to align with one adopted by the state legislature. According to this definition, rural schools are identified by school district rather than by county, and are those districts having 300 or fewer people per square mile. This definition increased the number of rural districts in Pennsylvania from 80 to 263.

The RAC's first priority was to determine what rural superintendents view as the most pressing issues and problems facing their districts. The RAC developed a needs assessment survey which was sent to the superintendents of Pennsylvania's 80 rural school districts; 74 percent responded. In addition, three RAC members conducted follow-up telephone interviews with a sample of 80 of the responding superintendents. The following issues (and problems) were reported to be of prime concern: fiscal issues (general funding, special education, transportation), community and family issues (economic development, factors that put students "at risk," poverty), administrative issues

(administrators performing multiple functions, state and federal regulations), and tax issues (absence of industry). The survey and interview data were included in a RAC report, a "Status Report of Pennsylvania's Rural School Districts," which the RAC then disseminated to a variety of organizations and individuals in the state with an interest in rural education. A priority for addressing state rural education needs then became the identification and dissemination of promising programs and practices. To meet this objective, the RAC sponsored its first Rural Education in Pennsylvania Conference in 1990, in Grantville.

Toward the end of FY 90, the Pennsylvania RAC adopted the following mission statement:

> ... to identify and address the unique challenges facing Pennsylvania school districts through establishing a continuing dialogue among rural school districts and private and governmental agencies that impacts directly upon the district's operations and entitlements as well as the human, technical, and educational resources made available to them.

The RAC also specified a number of broad objectives along with the mission statement, and decided to initially focus on the following three activities to support rural school redesign:

- establishing a rural education fund for Pennsylvania;
- conducting regional forums; and
- planning and conducting rural education conferences on exemplary practices.

In addition, the RAC planned to continue to explore ways in which rural schools can be improved, and to monitor state legislation related to rural education.

Progress has been made on carrying out each of these activities. A foundation for rural education is being established to support rural schools wishing to pursue improved communication and innovation by generating and

coordinating private sector support. The foundation will be housed in PARSS. As part of this effort, RAC members developed their own in-depth knowledge of strategic planning models. The RAC is also conducting local forums, in a variety of locations, as extensions of regularly scheduled RAC meetings to enable rural educators to identify and address relevant problems. The RAC conducted a second Rural Education in Pennsylvania Conference, "Creating a Climate for Change," in DuBois, in 1991. Its objectives were to provide effective models and strategies for change in the rural school context, along with relevant resources and opportunities for information sharing. The following year the RAC sponsored a third Rural Education in Pennsylvania Conference at Pennsylvania State University which focused on theoretical and practical issues related to the redesigning of rural schools. Specifically, the RAC wanted to help rural educators to cope with the impact of the state's new outcomes-based curriculum regulations and provide ideas about how to obtain and utilize educational technology. To this end, the conference included opportunities for district teams to develop action plans for restructuring and school improvement.

In 1992, the RAC decided to carry out two additional major activities in support of its objectives for rural school redesign in Pennsylvania. The first is to provide technical assistance to rural school districts involved in restructuring efforts. To date, this has included planning assistance, conducting workshops, identifying resources to facilitate the redesign process, and responding to proposals. The second RAC activity involves the development of policy position statements and the direct support of policy studies.

Some Preliminary Findings

In FY 88, RBS proposed that a RAC be formed in each of the four states in the mid-Atlantic region to assist with the development of state plans for the improvement of rural education. The four RACs were successfully formed (in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania) and over the four-year period, their rural assistance plans evolved and were gradually implemented. Today, RAC work on refining and implementing state rural education assistance plans continues. Moreover, the councils have assumed a major role in their state's rural improvement efforts and have become vehicles to develop enhanced capacity for rural school redesign and reform in the region. In spite of the differences among the four councils in membership and activities, some preliminary findings can be suggested as a result of RBS' four-year involvement with the four RACs:

- SEA support was important in establishing a firm foundation for each of the RACs. RBS initially strove to obtain the sanction and support of the SEA. What RBS found was that each state had its own special interests and needs related to rural education. Having strong initial SEA involvement, although time consuming, helped to shape the council's activities to meet those needs.

- The SEAs were critical in identifying and recommending RAC members who were committed individuals representing important rural constituencies. The majority of the RACs continue to include key players in each state's rural activities, as well as interested educators working in rural schools and SEA representatives. For the councils to have an impact, the collaboration of SEAs and other relevant organizations is critical, particularly in states such as Pennsylvania where these organizations and associations actively influence state policy.

- The development of a rural education assistance plan appears to be a slow process which moves in cycles. In all four states, it began with an exploratory phase during which the RACs gathered information to define their target rural population and identify salient needs. Following this exploration phase, the RACs drafted their plans and agreed on some general activities for implementation. This was generally followed by further exploration, including the review and revision of the initial plan and the targeting of more specific activities for implementation. In some cases, even initial definitions were revisited. In other cases, the planning process was repeated to address newly identified needs.

- RBS' participation appears to be a key element in RAC organization, and development and implementation of rural education assistance plans. The RBS staff member participating on each RAC provided ongoing technical assistance which had a strong impact on the RAC's direction and which was a highly valued contribution by other members. In addition, RBS provided financial assistance to selected RAC activities.

- An initial objective of the RACs has been the identification and dissemination of successful practices and programs for rural schools. Achievement of this objective has been a major contribution to the goal of improving rural education in each of the four states. Teachers, administrators, and parents from rural areas have been provided with R&D-based information, resources, and in some cases even training and technical assistance. The success of these activities can be attributed, in part, to RBS' partnerships with the NDN and other federal agencies and organizations (e.g., the Rural Technical Assistance Center), and state organizations and associations.

An objective of the Rural Education Project will continue to be to help the four RACs develop and implement their rural education assistance plans. To date, it appears that the councils are beginning to enhance both the awareness of rural education issues in their states and the support needed to sustain quality rural schools. For some RAC activities, such as supporting local rural/small school improvement activities, limited local capabilities and resources will continue to be a challenge.